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TEACHING ENGLISH TO FILIPINOS

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In the month of August, 1901, an army of more than six hundred school teachers was brought to Manila by the transport "Thomas." With the exception of some thirty or forty who had preceded them in July and in the earlier part of August, they were the pioneers who led the way in the attempt to make the Filipinos an English-speaking people. The decree had gone forth that public schools were to be established, in which all instruction was to be in English. A considerable number were retained in Manila, where schools were already well organized, but, for the most part, the undaunted six hundred found themselves, within a month, scattered to the four corners of an archipelago embracing 125,000 square miles of territory and extending through thirteen degrees of latitude, and their only specific orders were to organize schools.

The Philippine Islands are divided into thirty-six governmental subdivisions known as provinces, only one or two of which are entirely inland. Most provinces have long lines of seacoast, and include outlying islands off their coasts.

Each province has a provincial capital and one or more large towns, and these larger towns were the natural nuclei for educational work. There had been some attempt, under Spanish régime, at a general educational system, and almost any town of size contained two stone school buildings, one for boys, one for girls. They had been occupied usually as barracks during the war, and were, for the most part, badly out of repair. Blackboards had been

unknown in their original construction, but such had been the activity of the Educational Department of the newly organized civil government (effective July 4, 1901), that, by the end of September, large rectangles of hylo-plate and boxes of crayon were available in most of the larger towns.

In the beginning there was very little organization. Even when two or three teachers were assigned to the same town, each was a unit responsible only to the Director of Education at Manila. There was a division superintendent at each provincial capital; but he concerned himself chiefly with the distribution of supplies, with wrangles with municipal authorities to make them clean up and repair buildings, and with selecting school sites. He had no time to superintend individual work or to determine methods. Each teacher had to determine his own method and to carry it out unaided. The whole was a magnificent piece of idealism on the part of the Director of Education, Mr. Fred W. Atkinson; and although, in its day, it ceased to be useful and had to give way to an organized system, as an investment in human confidence it paid good returns. There were, of course, some failures, some teachers who, in spite of collegiate and normal degrees, stood helpless in the face of new conditions, and some who clung like leeches to a course of instruction that is not showing the best results even in American schools; but on the whole each teacher went practically to work to achieve results, and a comparison of all the methods used enabled the department, as it extended and grew into organized form, to select the best. That was the greatest result of Mr. Atkinson's optimism. Had the Educational Department been a highly centralized and organized one at the beginning, one hobbyist at Manila could have hopelessly clogged the workings of six hundred experimental minds. As it was, things grew gradually, and wise selection made the whole system of teaching English conform to practical and, at the same time, to scholarly methods.

At first the public schools were taken possession of by the aristocratic classes, among the children of whom were many youths, male and female, already fairly well educated in Spanish. These were instantly seized upon by the American teachers as good material for assistants, and most teachers separated the very pick of their schools into a class of *aspirantes*, giving them the bulk of

attention, and preparing them as rapidly as possible for primary teachers to begin work on the opening of the next school year.

Methods formed a general topic among all school teachers at that time. With my *aspirantes* I found a translating system the easiest. They all spoke Spanish, and this formed a medium of exchange. But with the little people, who knew no Spanish, it was necessary to begin at once with English.

The system which was developed by most teachers at that period continued in use some time after all primary teachers were Filipinos teaching in English, and it yields only gradually to a very determined effort at change. For want of a better term, it may be called the "noun" system. The teachers assumed that, if they only taught the names of all present and of many non-present objects, together with the pronouns and a certain number of prepositions, the pupils could speak English. The pupils soon learned to read English and to understand it fairly well when it was spoken to them, but their speaking and writing power did not keep pace with their reading.

To avoid too much history of experiment and discussion, the writer will briefly put forth as statements what seems to be the consensus of opinion among division superintendents and teachers who have been wrestling with this problem of anglicizing the speech of a people.

1. Language is a matter of memory, not of logic; but the memory of a word or phrase, as it is used in colloquial speech, is reliable only when it is firmly fixed by association with action or with objects.

2. The verb, not the noun, is the *point de résistance* in English. A child may have a vocabulary of several thousand words; but if the verb is relatively in the minority, and if he is not absolute master of the fine distinctions in meaning made by changes in verb tenses, he cannot express himself clearly, and he misses the meaning of most of what he reads. His reading work is largely guesswork, as he skips from noun to noun.

3. The American child whose vocabulary is fairly well formed before he enters school has acquired his vocabulary by practical experience; and the only way to give a corresponding development to the Filipino child's mind is to study the habits of speech as found in the American child before he is affected by the reading work

of his primary grades. For instance, the American child learns *see* and *saw* before he learns *shall see* or *will see*; but he learns *will give*, *shall give*, and *will you give* before he learns *give* and *gave*, though this last may be contemporaneous with the other words. It is probable that his first association for *give* or *gives* (in present tense forms) is made when he finds in his primer the old sentences, "Cows give us milk to drink," or "My father gives me presents," or any other statement in frequentative form.

4. The quickest and best results in teaching English are got by limiting the vocabulary of nouns as greatly as possible, and by seeing that some thirty or forty verbs of the language are developed in all their tense forms and meanings in the primary work. A pupil who knows fifty verbs and is unconscious master of all their tense forms can speak exceedingly good English if he has, in addition, a limited vocabulary of other words. And by his mastery of conjugation forms he is on the high road to correct assimilation of all that he reads; but a pupil who knows three hundred or even a thousand verbs which he can use only in the present tense can express himself only faultily, no matter how large a vocabulary he may have.

5. The assumption that the tense changes of a verb may be unconsciously acquired or picked up by reading is a wrong one. If a child has the present tense form only of a verb developed, he seldom acquires the others by merely seeing them in his reading lesson. Either he will try to make the present tense mean anything, or he will, by a translating system, endeavor to make some idiom of his own language fit the need.¹

¹ In the primary course hitherto, no systematic teaching of hypothetical phrases has taken place. But nothing can do away with the need of hypothetical expression; so the Filipino pupil has invented one. This form comes in from all parts of the islands, its development in the remotest parts showing the independence with which each mind has acted, and yet it conforms to some native rule of which the writer is ignorant. The form is:

"If I did not hear the music I will not know there is a procession"
for

"If I had not heard the music, I should not have known that there was a procession."

"If I did not buy me a new coat I will not go to the *baile* (ball)"
for

"If I had not bought me a new coat, I could not have gone to the ball."

The writer in her experience of directing correspondence-study work with Filipino teachers who have had from five to seven years in American schools, has met this

6. The best way to teach the English conjugation is by actual association with action. For instance, suppose a child is to take up the verb *bring*. The future, the imperative, and the past indicative tenses of nearly all verbs will conform to certain uses which accompany certain dialogue. Let the child have a book on his desk. The teacher says "Jose, will you bring me your book?" and Jose must be taught to reply, "Yes, I will bring it to you with pleasure," or "I will bring it to you if you wish me to."

TEACHER: Bring it to me.

Jose obeys.

TEACHER: What did you do?

JOSE: I brought you my book.

After the developing of some fifteen or twenty verbs in this manner, the pupil has the data for an unconscious conclusion about the English conjugation. The matter should not be left before it is well driven home. Grammatical explanation is perfectly unnecessary. All that the pupil needs is drill and unmistakable clearness of application. For instance, in teaching the hypothetical sentence, a pupil should be requested to ask another pupil for what the second pupil clearly does not possess. For example:

JOSE: Maria, please lend me your pencil.

MARIA: I have no pencil. If I had one I would lend it to you with pleasure.

When dialogue like this has been repeated with numberless verbs, the pupil begins to see the application of the verb phrase, and knows how to use it. This phrase, however, is peculiar to dialogue and is never found in narrative. The corresponding narrative form can only be taught by first going through dialogue and action, then by letting some pupil describe the action after it

attempt at the hypothetical sentence again and again. Yet not one of the writers ever saw such a sentence—or heard it in his school work; while he has met the correct form hundreds or even thousands of times in his reading work. The recurrence of this error seems to point indubitably to the conclusion that language, except in the unusually gifted person, is not acquired by reading, but is acquired by direct association with action and circumstance in real life. This conclusion is further borne out by the fact that the hypothetical sentence given above is one not likely to occur in ordinary school experience, while such a one as "If I were you, I should do," etc., is very common in school experience, and most Filipinos use it with facility. Both expressions are equally frequent in reading-work, but one is not frequent to school routine. The pupil acquires that for which he has a practical use. The other makes little or no impression upon him.

has become a matter of the past. For example, "Jose asked Maria to lend him her pencil, but she did not have one. If she had had a pencil she would have loaned it to him with pleasure."

The reader may fancy that he has acquired some of his own mastery of tense forms from mere reading, but the writer doubts it. When we meet these hypothetical, contrary-to-fact sentences in books, it is only because we have already bridged by practical experience the gulf from dialogue to narrative that the sentence has meaning to us. Even with simple *will* and *would*, the little child finds out by painful experience the relation between "If you do that again I will punish you," and "I told you that, if you did that again, I would punish you," and it is his recollection of circumstance, gained through joy or tears, which enables him to understand "John Smith said that those who would not work should not eat."

It is impossible in an article of this length to do more than hint at the innumerable complexities of detail encountered in the attempt to educate a Filipino, using only English. It should be stated that owing to its limitations, the pupil grasps technical English more readily than general colloquial English. On one occasion some years ago a certain set of fifth-grade English examination questions contained the following three commands:

1. To analyze a given sentence.
2. To write a composition about rice planting.
3. To describe a carnival procession which had taken place shortly before.

In a class of thirty-three pupils which came under the writer's observation, nearly the whole class analyzed the sentence in faultless English. Nearly all of them also wrote the essay on rice culture in good English; but when they entered upon general English where there had been no detailed drill on expression, the class failed utterly. The verb was the cause. They could not twist it into its manifold significations; they had not the command of subordinate connections which correct verb-usage entails. The result started the writer to thinking and to comparing notes with other teachers. In turn, discussions became more general and more public; and though there are those who dissent, I find most of the teachers in agreement with what has been stated in this article.

During my visit in the States, I was naturally eager to talk to teachers about English. I found, in the several centers of learning where I had opportunity to discuss the English work, a considerable dissatisfaction with the results of much labor, but very little attempt to analyze the cause. I myself had no time for a detailed study of methods, or of results; but I am convinced, after seeing the results of using American texts with Filipinos, that we are taking far too much for granted about the pupil's ability to imbibe, as it were, the language, and I wonder, if, with our immense foreign-born population, we should not require at home more conscious attention to drill in expression. I wonder if we are not making the mistake of assuming, as we first did in the Philippines, that the child will acquire and use correctly language from his reading. The truth is, we do nothing of the sort. If we could, the persistent readers of Shakspeare would talk or write as well as he does. Practice in using it, not in reading it, is what gives command of a language. Orators are often less well read than their auditors, but they can use all the words or phrases that they know, or, to put it differently, their language is better memorized.